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The Art of Writing Proposals: Some Candid Suggestions for Applicants to Social Science Research Council Competitions

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Writing proposals for research funding is a peculiar facet of North American academic culture, and as with all things cultural, its attributes rise only partly into public consciousness. A proposal's overt function is to persuade a committee of scholars that the project shines with the three kinds of merit all disciplines value, namely, conceptual innovation, methodological rigor, and rich, substantive content. But to make these points stick, a proposal writer needs a feel for the unspoken customs, norms, and needs that govern the selection process itself. These are not really as arcane or ritualistic as one might suspect. For the most part, these customs arise from the committee's efforts to deal in good faith with its own problems: incomprehension among disciplines, work overload, and the problem of equitably judging proposals that reflect unlike social and academic circumstances.

Writing for committee competition is an art quite different from research work itself. After long deliberation, a committee usually has to choose among proposals that all possess the three virtues mentioned above. Other things being equal, the proposal that is awarded funding is the one that gets its merits across more forcefully because it addresses these unspoken needs and norms as well as the overt rules. The purpose of these pages is to give competitors for Council fellowships and funding a more even start by making explicit some of those normally unspoken customs and needs.

Capture the Reviewer's Attention?

While the form and the organization of a proposal are matters of taste, you should choose your form bearing in mind that every proposal reader constantly scans for clear answers to three questions:

> What are we going to learn as the result of the proposed project that we do not know now?
> Why is it worth knowing?
> How will we know that the conclusions are valid?

Working through a tall stack of proposals on voluntarily-donated time, a committee member rarely has time to comb proposals for hidden answers. So, say what you

have to say immediately, crisply, and forcefully. The opening paragraph, or the first page at most, is your chance to grab the reviewer's attention. Use it. This is the moment to overstate, rather than understate, your point or question. You can add the conditions and caveats later.

Questions that are clearly posed are an excellent way to begin a proposal: Are strong party systems conducive to democratic stability? Was the decline of population growth in Brazil the result of government policies? These should not be rhetorical questions; they have effect precisely because the answer is far from obvious. Stating your central point, hypothesis, or interpretation is also a good way to begin: Workers do not organize unions; unions organize workers. The success, and failure, of Corazon Aquino's revolution stems from its middle-class origins. Population growth coupled with loss of arable land poses a threat to North African food security in the next decade.

Obviously some projects are too complex and some conceptualizations too subtle for such telegraphic messages to capture. Sometimes only step-by-step argumentation can define the central problem. But even if you adopt this strategy, do not fail to leave the reviewer with something to remember: some message that will remain after reading many other proposals and discussing them for hours and hours. She's the one who claims that Argentina never had a liberal democratic tradition is how you want to be referred to during the committee's discussion, not Oh yes, she's the one from Chicago.

Aim for Clarity

Remember that most proposals are reviewed by multidisciplinary committees. A reviewer studying a proposal from another field expects the proposer to meet her halfway. After all, the reader probably accepted the committee appointment because of the excitement of surveying other people's ideas. Her only reward is the chance that proposals will provide a lucidly-guided tour of various disciplines' research frontiers. Don't cheat the reviewer of this by inflicting a tiresome trek through the duller idiosyncrasies of your discipline. Many disciplines have parochial traditions of writing in pretentious jargon. You should avoid jargon as much as you can, and when technical language is really needed, restrict yourself to those new words and technical terms that truly lack equivalents in common language. Also, keep the spotlight on ideas. An archeologist should argue the concepts latent in the ceramic typology more than the typology itself, a historian the tendency latent in the mass of events, and so forth. When additional technical material is needed, or when the argument refers to complex ancillary material, putting it into appendices decongests the main text.

Establish the Context

Your proposal should tell the committee not only what will be learned as a result of your project, but what will be learned that somebody else does not already know. It is essential that the proposal summarize the current state of knowledge and provide an up-to-date, comprehensive bibliography. Both should be precise and succinct. They need not constitute a review of the literature but a sharply focused view of the specific body or bodies of knowledge to which you will add. Committees often treat bibliographies as a sign of seriousness on the part of the applicant, and some members will put considerable effort into evaluating them. A good bibliography testifies that the author did enough preparatory work to make sure the project will complement and not duplicate other people's efforts. Many proposals fail because the references are incomplete or outdated. Missing even a single reference can be very costly if it shows failure to connect with research directly relevant to one's own. Proposal writers with limited library resources are urged to correspond with colleagues and libraries elsewhere in the early stages of research planning. Resource guides such as Dissertation Abstracts International and Social Science Periodical Index are highly recommended. For many disciplines, annual reviews (e.g., Annual Review of Anthropology) offer state-of-the-art discussions and rich bibliographies. Some disciplines have bibliographically-oriented journals, for example Review of Economic Literature and Contemporary Sociology. There are also valuable area studies-oriented guides: Handbook of Latin American Studies, International African Bibliography, etc. Familiarizing yourself with them can save days of research. Powerful bibliographic searches can be run on CD-ROM databases such as the Social Science Citations Index, Social Sciences Index, and Modern Language Association International Index. Also, on-line databases such as CARL and ERIC, available by library or network access, greatly increase your bibliographic reach.

What's the Payoff?

Disciplinary norms and personal tastes in justifying research activities differ greatly. Some scholars are swayed by the statement that it has not been studied (e.g., an historian may argue that no book has been written about a particular event, and therefore one is needed), while other scholars sometimes reflect that there may be a good reason why not. Nevertheless, the fact that less is known about one's own chosen case, period, or country than about similar ones may work in the proposer's favor. Between two identical projects, save that one concerns Egypt and the other the Sudan, reviewers are likely to prefer the latter. Citing the importance of the events that provide the subject matter is another and perhaps less dubious appeal. Turning points, crucial breakthroughs, central personages, fundamental institutions, and similar appeals to the significance of the object of research are sometimes effective if argued rather than merely asserted. Appealing to current importance may also work: e.g., democratic consolidation in South America, the aging population in

industrialized countries, the relative decline of the hegemony of the United States. It's crucial to convince readers that such topics are not merely timely, but that their current urgency provides a window into some more abiding problem. Among many social scientists, explicit theoretical interest counts heavily as a point of merit. Theoretical exposition need not go back to the axiomatic bases of the discipline, proposal readers will have a reasonable interdisciplinary breadth, but it should situate the local problem in terms of its relevance to live, sometimes controversial, theoretical currents. Help your reader understand where the problem intersects the main theoretical debates in your field and show how this inquiry puts established ideas to the test or offers new ones. Good proposals demonstrate awareness of alternative viewpoints and argue the author's position in such a way as to address the field broadly, rather than developing a single sectarian tendency indifferent to alternatives.

Use a Fresh Approach

Surprises, puzzles, and apparent contradictions can powerfully persuade the reviewer whose disciplinary superego enforces a commitment to systematic model building or formal theorizing: Given its long-standing democratic traditions, Chile was expected to return to democracy before other countries in the Southern Cone, and yet . . . Is it because these traditions were already extinct by 1973 or because the assumption on which this prediction was based is false? Everyone expected that One Big Union--the slogan of the movement--would strike and win wage increases for workers. Yet statistical evidence shows just the contrary: strong unions do not strike but instead restrain workers' wage demands.

It is often worthwhile to help readers understand how the research task grows from the intellectual history or current intellectual life of the country or region that generated it. Council committees strive to build linkages among an immense diversity of national and international intellectual traditions, and members come from various countries and schools of thought. Many committee members are interested in the interplay of diverse traditions. In fact, the chance to see intellectual history in the making is another reason people accept committee membership. It is a motive to which proposals can legitimately appeal.

It pays to remember that topics of current salience, both theoretical and in the so-called real world, are likely to be a crowded field. The competitors will be more numerous and the competition less interesting than in truly unfamiliar terrain. Unless you have something original to say about them, you may be well advised to avoid topics typically styled of central interest to the discipline. Usually these are topics about which everyone is writing, and the reason is that somebody else has already made the decisive and exciting contribution. By the time you write your proposal, obtain funding, do the research, and write it up, you might wish you were working on

something else. So if your instinct leads you to a problem far from the course that the pack is running, follow it, not the pack: nothing is more valuable than a really fresh beginning.

Describe Your Methodology

Methodological canons are largely discipline-specific and vary widely even within some disciplines. But two things can safely be said about methodological appeal. First, the proposal must specify the research operations you will undertake and the way you will interpret the results of these operations in terms of your central problem. Do not just tell what you mean to achieve, tell how you will spend your time while doing it. Second, a methodology is not just a list of research tasks but an argument as to why these tasks add up to the best attack on the problem. An agenda by itself will normally not suffice because the mere listing of tasks to perform does not prove that they add up to the best feasible approach.

Some popularly-used phrases fall short of identifying recognizable research operations. For example, I will look at the relation between x and y is not informative. We know what is meant when an ornithologist proposes to look at a bird, but looking at a relation between variables is something one only does indirectly, by operations like digging through dusty archive boxes, interviewing, observing and taking standardized notes, collecting and testing statistical patterns, etc. How will you tease the relationship of underlying forces from the mass of experience? The process of gathering data and moving from data to interpretation tends to follow disciplinary customs, more standard in some fields than in others; help readers from other fields recognize what parts of your methodology are standard, which are innovative. Be as specific as you possibly can be about the activities you plan to undertake to collect information, about the techniques you will use to analyze it, and about the tests of validity to which you commit yourself. Most proposals fail because they leave reviewers wondering what the applicant will actually do. Tell them! Specify the archives, the sources, the respondents, and the proposed techniques of analysis.

A research design proposing comparison between cases often has special appeal. In a certain sense all research is comparative because it must use, implicitly or explicitly, some point of reference. Making the comparison explicit raises its value as scientific inquiry. In evaluating a comparative proposal, readers ask whether the cases are chosen in such a way that their similarities and differences illuminate the central question. And is the proposer in a position to execute both legs of the comparison? When both answers are positive, the proposal may fare particularly well.

The proposal should prove that the researcher either possesses, or cooperates with people who possess, mastery of all the technical matters the project entails. For

example, if a predominantly literary project includes an inquiry into the influence of the Tupian language on rural Brazilian Portuguese, the proposal will be checked for the author's background in linguistics and/or Indian languages, or the author's arrangements to collaborate with appropriate experts.

Specify Your Objectives

A well-composed proposal, like a sonata, usually ends by alluding to the original theme. How will research procedures and their products finally connect with the central question? How will you know if your idea was wrong or right? In some disciplines this imperative traditionally means holding to the strict canon of the falsifiable hypothesis. While respecting this canon, committee members are also open to less formal approaches. What matters is to convince readers that something is genuinely at stake in the inquiry, that it is not tendentiously moving toward a preconceived end, and that this leaven of the unknown will yield interesting, orderly propositions.

Proposals should normally describe the final product of the project: an article, book, chapter, dissertation, etc. If you have specific plans, it often helps to spell them out, because specifying the kind of journal in which you hope to publish, or the kind of people you hope to address, will help readers understand what might otherwise look like merely odd features of the proposal. While planning and drafting your proposal, you should keep in mind the program guidelines and application procedures outlined in the brochure specific to the Council program to which you are applying. If you have specific questions about the program, you may wish to consult with a staff member. Your final proposal should include all requested enclosures and appendices.

Final Note

To write a good proposal takes a long time. Start early. Begin thinking about your topic well in advance and make it a habit to collect references while you work on other tasks. Write a first draft at least three months in advance, revise it, show it to colleagues. Let it gather a little dust, collect colleagues' comments, revise it again. If you have a chance, share it with a seminar or similar group; the debate should help you anticipate what reviewers will eventually think. Revise the text again for substance. Go over the language, style, and form. Resharpen your opening paragraph or first page so that it drives home exactly what you mean as effectively as possible.

Good luck.